

Speak Out: A Step-by-step Fluency Activity for English Learners in China

By Leng Hui

It is generally agreed that fluency is an essential requirement for communicative competence. It is also agreed that an excessive concern with accuracy will raise the affective filter and block fluency. One way of overcoming this obstacle is to provide students with so much oral input and output in communicative activities that they are forced to focus on meaning rather than on monitoring grammar rules. This article describes one activity called *Speak Out*, which my students used successfully to achieve fluency in the classroom. *Speak Out* is a 30-minute speaking activity which works well in an integrative skill program. The objective of the activity is to improve students' fluency through communicative interactions. The topic of the activity is personal experience, discussing rites of passage. There are three main procedures in the activity, which progress from a controlled interaction to a guided activity, and finally to a free, social interaction.

Three Procedures

I. Controlled interaction-group work

Procedure I is a pre-communicative interaction. It is controlled in the sense that the students depend to a great extent on the text. In other words, both the topic that the students are going to discuss and the language used for the discussion are based on the text.

Speak Out starts after students have read an article "Rites of Passage" individually and returned the handout to the teacher. In this procedure, there are two tasks. The first one asks the group members to discuss the meaning of the title, "Rites of Passage." The second one asks each member to take his/her turn to retell one of the milestones experienced by the author. (There are 13 mentioned in the text.) To scaffold the interaction, the teacher draws the students' attention to Table 1 (See Table 1 below) on the blackboard. Students will speak using both the text and the table.

While one student describes the milestones, others in the group interact with him/her cooperatively. They can help the speakers when they have difficulty expressing themselves, so that the communication does not break down and the whole class develops a positive and participatory atmosphere. The class is told to form groups of four, each with a volunteer student group leader to ensure the progress of the activity. Each group has 10 minutes; first, to discuss the meaning of the title and to reach a group agreement; second, to retell one milestone event mentioned in the text. The listeners should be supportive and cooperative, not interrupting but rather asking clarification questions for aspects which are not clear.

II. Guided interaction-pair work

Procedure II is a guided interaction. The students now form into pairs. Each student is provided with a picture. There are seven pictures in a set, covering some of the most important events in an average American's life. The students discuss the pictures they receive from the teacher. But it is left to the students to decide how to describe the pictures or what words are used for the description.

The pictures depict stages in life such as starting school, obtaining a driving license, graduating from high school, becoming financially independent, getting married, having children, and retiring. Procedure II calls for careful organization on the part of the teacher because it is necessary to ensure that each student in the pair will be given different pictures, which will not be shown to partners. These pictures guide the students to talk further about the topic, activating their prior knowledge for Procedure III, free interaction.

After each person has obtained a picture, the whole class examines the picture closely for a while, and then each student takes a turn using his/her own words to describe the picture to his/her partner. After the description, the partner will sum up the significance of the event according to the description and give a title for the picture.

The speaker bridges the information gap by conveying meaning naturally without overly worrying about the accuracy of language form. Meanwhile, the partner will ask for clarification in order to give a summary of the message of the picture and to figure out the title of the picture. The interaction, therefore, entails some verbal communication strategies such as explaining and paraphrasing, appealing for help, and asking for clarification. In this way Procedure II goes a step further to achieve fluency. To guide the interaction, the teacher provides a reference list on the blackboard with the following questions:

1. Who are the characters involved?
2. What are they doing there?
3. What is the setting?
4. At about what date does the event take place?
5. How do the characters feel about themselves?

When the students have finished describing and summarizing the pictures, the whole class sorts out the seven pictures and puts them into a logical order so that the students can have a complete idea about the topic. The instructions for Procedure II are: Select a partner to form a pair. Take turns and use 5 minutes each to describe your "secret picture" to your partner. The partner should summarize the significance of the picture and then give it a title. Use the list on the blackboard as a reference for the description.

III. Free interaction-pair work

Procedure III is a free communicative interaction. Students are free to use their own words to talk about their own personal events in their own way. Though the setting is still the classroom, the interaction takes place between students in an authentic communicative context. Fluency is the foremost requirement in this context and is the aim of the activity.

After the first two procedures, students should be quite clear about the content of the lesson. At the same time, their related experience has been activated. For the free interaction, they are familiar with both the content and language to use in the activity. They can keep their real identity, sharing their personal events with a friend, or they can play the role of a journalist, conducting an informal interview with their partner. Alternatively, they can do a brief survey, guiding the partner to fill in a questionnaire they have designed.

The instructions for Procedure III are the following: Each pair should take 10 minutes for a free conversation about some significant events in your school days. You and your partner can be:

- A. two old friends recalling your school days;
- B. a journalist and a well-known writer talking about a memorable event;
- C. a social surveyor and his/her informant filling in a questionnaire.

Justification of the Activity

Speak Out is designed according to a functional view of language and a skill- learning model of learning (Littlewood, 1981:44). This view of language sees language as a vehicle to express functional meanings in a social context. Such a view of language implies that English classroom teaching should bridge the gap between language forms and language functions. It proposes that language teaching should develop communicative competence, which prepares the learners with a potential ability to deal with unpredictable, authentic communicative situations.

The skill learning model of learning presumes that "the acquisition of communicative competence in language is an example of skill development,.performance.occurs mainly through practice" (Littlewood 1981:74). Because of the foreign language learning environment in China, students learn English under a tutored condition in classrooms. The lack of a natural language environment is a big handicap.

Speak Out provides ample student- centered speaking opportunities for the students to interact with one another in English. Though the classroom is not a totally authentic communicative situation, it can be "a real social context in its own right" (Littlewood 1981:44). So through talking about a text, some important events in American life and their own personal experience, students practice the use of English for meaningful communication in the classroom.

Conclusion

Speak Out is a fluency-based activity, which can upgrade students' oral performance. It provides sufficient opportunities for each student to use oral English in both pre- communicative and communicative contexts. The three procedures are structured to assist and stimulate active participation from all the students. Such active meaningful participation fosters a positive

classroom spirit, which lowers the affective filter. The underlying principle is to improve students' oral fluency through communicative and step-by-step practice.

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Table 1

	Place	Approximate Time	Event	Significance
1				
2				
3				
4				